



## Seeing and Believing, Science and Mythology: Notes on the "Mythological" Genre

Chidananda Das Gupta

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# Seeing and Believing, Science and Mythology

## Notes on the “Mythological” Genre

One remarkable outcome of the transplantation of the technological art of the cinema into India’s pre-industrial society is that the adage “seeing is believing” acquires startling new meaning. In the industrial societies of the West, audiovisual media (film or video) are both trusted and distrusted. Thus Western audiences routinely make sophisticated judgments about the “realism” or “believability” of plots and characters: love stories on the screen may be effective emotionally yet at the same time clearly recognized as fiction; news stories on television are by and large believed, although the reported speeches of politicians may not be. The situation with Indian audiences has been very different, and the differences are not reassuring.

When films began in earnest in India, with Phalke’s *Harischchandra* in 1913, suddenly the gods and god-like men of mythology came to overwhelmingly visible life. This 3,700-foot film’s story, taken from the great epic the *Mahabharata*, and dramatizing personal sacrifice for duty, was a stupendous public success. (It was remade 20 times in eight languages in the succeeding 50 years.) Its successors, films like Phalke’s own *Bhasmasur*, *Mohini Savitri* [Seductress Savitri], and *Lanka Dahan* [The Burning of Lanka] were equally popular and established “the mythological” as a long-lasting genre of Indian cinema—important still today to a degree inconceivable to the West even in the heyday of the Western genre. Previously the Hindus had seen their trinity and pantheon in their minds and in images of earth and stone. Now they saw them walking, flying in space, throwing flaming discs (Vishnu’s Sudershana-Chakra), setting offenders aflame with a burning look, making the dead come alive, appearing out of and vanishing into nowhere.

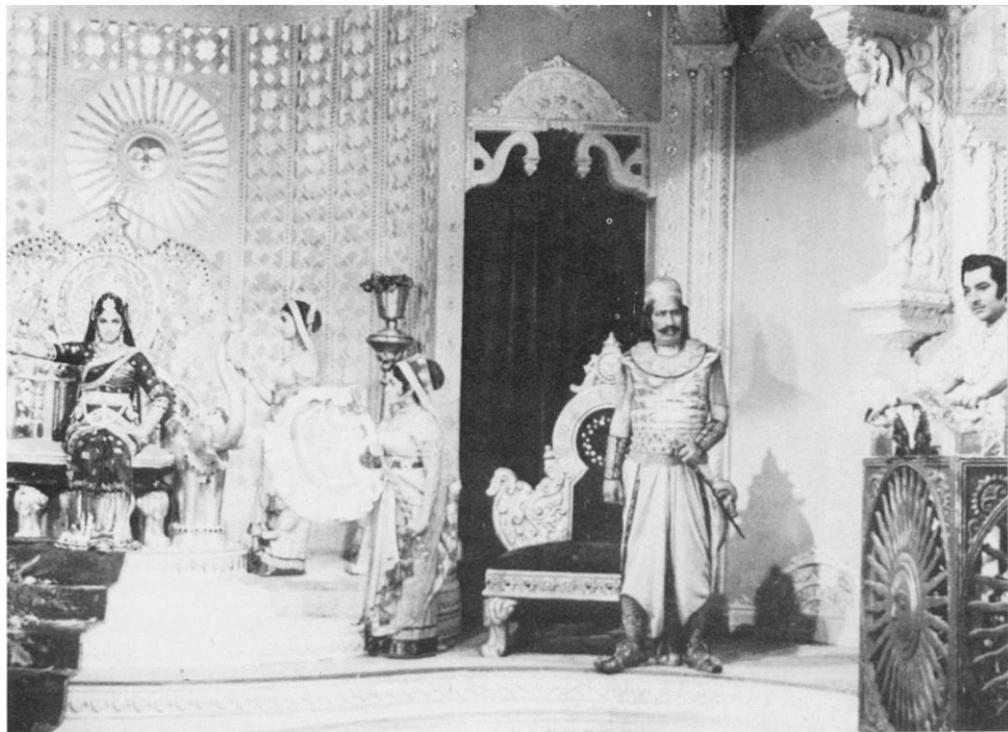
Previously the country of the gods had existed only in the mind’s eye, sustained by a

network of myths, legends, and static visual representations spawned by the traditional epics and the legendary repositories of history and religion called *puranas*. The passionate loves and hates of the gods had been seen as play (*leela*) evoked by the devotee in his or her imagination. Now, suddenly, these imagined scenes were there, on the screen, as reality!<sup>1</sup> Here was the god Raja Harishchandra (of the *Mahabharata*) walking barefoot through the brambles, giving away his son and wife for the sake of charity. There was Rama (from the *Ramayana*) walking with Sita in Dandakaranya forest in the many films of Vijay Bhatt. Inside the cinema theater, the devout respectfully took off their shoes and sat with piously folded hands; some even threw offerings at the screen.

Ramrajya [roughly, “Rama’s realm”], the ideal kingdom celebrated in the *Ramayana*, ruled by Ram, king of Ayodhya, had always lived in the Hindu mind suspended outside historical time. It was a vision hidden in the Hindu heart through a millennium of alien domination—first by the Muslim kingdoms that expanded into an Indian empire, and then by the Christian British who ruled from afar. This deep-seated nostalgic dream of Ramrajya, sanctified into divine myth, was what Gandhi appealed to in support of his nonviolent campaign against British rule. At a critical gathering in 1920 at King Edward Hostel, he moved everyone in a way they had never been moved by declaring that the present situation was *Ravan-Raj*—the rule of the evil king Ravana who kidnapped Rama’s wife Sita.<sup>2</sup> In using this Hindu mythology, Gandhi made a kind of contact before the days of mass-communication technology that leaders of later generations could not.

Until 1923, 70% of Indian films were “mythologicals,” reliably successful at the box office since they appealed directly to a diverse audience linked by the common undercurrent of

HARISHCHANDRA  
TARIMATI,  
*one of the  
numerous  
variations  
on the  
Harishchandra  
theme*



religious beliefs. Besides, they helped to hide the social stigma then attached to performers, especially if it was a woman behind the divine garb. And they served the deeper purpose of affirming faith in an age of alien challenge. The British conquerors were preceded (and followed) by Christian missionaries always eager to bribe the native believer with their kind of education, promising advancement in the new world they were making, full of marvelous machines such as trains, buses, and trams, post offices, telegraphs, and ships. The advantages of embracing the conquerors' faith appeared to be many; at poorer social and intellectual levels, they were difficult to resist. It was even more difficult to separate the self into behavioral compartments—outwardly conforming with the conquerors' norms, inwardly clinging to traditional faiths. For the urban majority, seeing the gods in the cinema became a subtle aid in propping up belief in them, and gave Indian cinema a quasi-religious tenor utterly without parallel in the West. The fact that the screen gods were humans dressed up in divine costumes mattered little. Rich people took early stars like Prem Adib (who played Rama in *Harishchandra*) or Shobhana Samarth (who played his wife Sita) straight from the studios to their homes and worshipped them with flowers, lights, and music.<sup>3</sup>

As the screen lit up in the vast night in the open air, or inside the womb of the dark cin-

ema, a primeval dream unfolded before the eyes in which the gods lived and had their being, emerging from an ancient communal memory secreted within the self. The thrill was no less than that of the first audiences in Europe trembling as the Lumière's train approached the station. For the devout Hindu, it was almost like the traditional glimpse of God in a dream that directly influenced action—something enshrined, decades later, through the sympathetic but unbelieving eye of Satyajit Ray in *Devi*.

Seeing gods in the cinema was very different from seeing them in folk-theater performances. The theater gods of Bengal or Karnataka could not actually fly, or burn, or vanish. The actors in the folk theater were too real; too often you knew where they lived, and saw them paint their faces before they entered the arena. The true play of the gods, impossible to disbelieve, was only manifest when the cinema arrived; here they were real and yet shadowy, not grossly present in a way to make them lose their distance and dignity. The folk theater was (and still is, despite its decline) actually based on what we might call today Brechtian alienation; when film-makers like Ketan Mahta evoke its forms in their films, they keep spectators firmly seated in the reality of their cinema seats.

The medium of cinema works against the stylization of folk forms. When film is stylized today, as in the works of a Mani Kaul or a Nirad Mahapatra, it may obtain success on the

international festival circuit but it loses the popular reach of the folk tradition. In pre-industrial society, production was individualized, regionally fixed; its art was largely an anonymous by-product of religion and regional culture enclosed within narrow limits of social and geographical mobility. The difference between art and craft was marginal. The maker of an image or a water pot knew the buyer of it personally and sold it through direct encounter. The folk theater reflected this reality. It drew both its religious and secular content, sometimes fusing them, sometimes treating them separately, from the prevailing tradition of the area. It projected them in a way suitable for open spaces and dim lights. Naturalism in acting and staging were hardly possible; the voice had to be raised in order to be heard, the gesture had to be grand in order to be seen. It is this style that was at first directly transferred to the cinema but modified over the years to acquire a greater degree of naturalism. In any case, compared to the folk theater, the illusion of reality in the cinema was greater even at the beginning. For one thing, the miracles, wrought in Phalke's mythologicals with the innovative flair of a Méliès, came to life far more vividly than they could ever have either on the new-fangled proscenium stage or in the traditional folk theater.

In an interview in 1979, Kamalabai Gokhale, reminiscing on her acting in the early mythologicals of Dadabhai Phalke around 1914, commented on the cinema's disconcerting immediacy: "Theatre acting is done within the norms of restraint. It is symbolic, particularly in love scenes. On the stage you keep your distance, decide your limit and say that I would go no further than holding hands . . . But in a love scene in a film, you have to embrace—really embrace—the other fellow in front of the camera. Otherwise it would make no sense." This was not long after the period when even prostitutes found it socially embarrassing to appear in the cinema, and men often had to play the parts of women.

The cinema has a lot to do with materialism. Our apprehension of individual and collective life, and the factors surrounding or determining them must be accomplished, in industrial society, through a new ability to understand material things. The cinema was made possible by scientists who sought to fashion instruments



*The play of the gods: SAVITRI (1937)*

to capture animal locomotion or the transit of a planet. Babbage was a mathematician, Herschel an astronomer, Etienne Jules Marey an anatomist; Eadweard Muybridge, photographer, may be considered the only artist among the inventors of cinema. The rest were scientists or, like Edison and Dickson, technologists.

The very need for an additional dimension to the communicative arts arose out of conditions created by the industrial revolution. Modern technology, urbanization, high mobility, and rapid communication introduced a whole new set of sights, sounds, symbols and their material inter-relationships which demanded interpretation. A jet fighter shooting up the sky leaving a vapor trail, or a man walking along the street seen from a hundred floors above can be evoked in writing, but when they are seen in the cinema they carry a more formidable kind of conviction of materiality. But far from inducing a "modern," skeptical, secular spirit, the mythological genre gave access for the Hindu pantheon to this powerful instrument of belief; instead of retreating before science, as in the West, the Indian gods obtained new life from it.

More recently, the gods of Indian politics—often originally born in the mythological world of cinema—have used the same technological instrument to induce popular conviction in their divinity—and obtain support at the ballot box as avatars of Krishna or Rama. Indeed two of

them who promised, and created, something of the illusion of realizing Ramrajya both bear Rama's name: Madanapally Gopala Ramachandran in the state of Tamil Nadu and Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh. The process of equation of fact with myth, the easy movement of the Indian mind between the two, is helped by the nature of visual perception in pre-industrial societies. A servant newly arrived from a village saw a painting by Jamini Roy hanging on the wall while he was dusting my room. (This was before Roy had become an icon in the art world; Calcutta's British-trained middle class was still objecting to the long necks of his women, with eyes extended out sideways beyond their sockets.) I asked him what he thought of it. "It is exactly like a photograph," he replied. For him, the illusion of verisimilitude came easy. The morphological perceptions of industrial peoples, tempered by a scientific assessment of what appears real, are more critical; they instantly verify the form in terms of geometry or physiology, gauging its solidity, comparing it to others of the species and, through inductive logic, generalizing from the particular to some general gestalt.

The appearance of any element depends upon its place and function in the pattern as a whole. "Far from being a mechanical recording of sensory elements, vision turned out to be a truly creative grasp of reality," wrote Rudolf Arnheim.<sup>4</sup> Thinking within the orbit of Baconian science, one would conclude that all vision is shaped by a struggle for the orderly conception of natural form, proceeding in a logical development from the perceptually simplest patterns to increasing complexity. When the Western-trained mind looks at one side of a ball, we also "see" the other, i.e., not a partial but a complete sphere.

But to the average Hindu, the elephant-headed god Ganesh (celebrated in the last sequence of *Salaam Bombay!*) is not a representation of an abstract idea; he exists, even though he cannot be encountered in the flesh. The question of a purely *material* existence behind the form is unimportant, because in traditional Indian art, as opposed to the academic art born out of scientific awareness in post-Renaissance Europe, the form is seen in the mind, not in reality. Thus the form of the seated Buddha embodies the idea of meditation; the dancing Shiva embodies the idea of cosmic rhythm. The idea exists in

human form, thus *manifesting itself* in material terms; whereas in European perception, the material form exists mutely in nature and must be informed with an idea. There is some reversal of this in post-industrial society's sophisticated modern "Art," but that is confined to a small minority producing an elite speculative-market commodity rather than the whole of society yielding art as a by-product of essential socioeconomic processes as in pre-industrial societies. Even so, modern art remains within the tenets of scientific perception; it analyzes light or density, or assembles aspects of material reality; the point of reference from which it withdraws, or against which it contends, is still the naturalistic image.

For the bulk of the population of India, however, the process of perception has not been metamorphosed by science into a way of grasping the material existence of objects. The cinema therefore still works to merge myth and fact rather than to separate them. "Even after seven decades of films, gullible members of the audience were seen laying themselves prostrate before the screen deity in motion picture theaters throughout India when *Jai Santoshi Maa* [Hail Mother Santoshi, 1975] was shown."<sup>5</sup> Only in high-literacy areas subjected to Western thought structures, especially Marxist materialism, such as the states of Kerala and West Bengal, does the cinema audience have a ready ability to distinguish myth from fact. Thus Prem Nazir may hold the Guinness Books of Records title for having made the largest number of films of any actor in the world (more than 600!) but when he developed political ambitions the people of Kerala made it quite clear that their matinee idol would not be acceptable as a political chief. This was not the case with M. G. Ramachandran or N. T. Rama Rao, the two ex-star state Chief Ministers. The nearest Western parallel to what they have accomplished might be Charlton Heston, having played Moses not once but dozens of times, running for office as a divinely wise law-giver—and winning overwhelmingly.

M. G. Ramachandran became Chief Minister in Tamil Nadu through a carefully planned building of his "savior" image in a series of films. These films showed "MGR" always in a favorable light, doing good to various sectors of society (taken up one by one in his films). Moreover, they repeatedly represented the colors of



"N.T.R." in STREEMAD VIRATA PARVAM, a Telugu mythological film based on the Mahabharata

the party flag and used rhetoric that dramatized the party manifesto. The do-gooder of the screen was easily elected because myth and fact had merged; there was little public consciousness of the savior image as *illusion*. When someone made a feature film, during MGR's Chief Ministership, on the shortage of water in his state, one comment heard was that the film had the wrong hero; if only MGR had been in charge, he would have brought the water. There is an element of Frazerian imitative magic here; if water can be brought in the screen image, it will come in real life. Even if it does not come soon, the magic principle is not altered; the faith that the savior will ultimately save, persists.

N. T. Rama Rao acted in 292 films before he became Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh by defeating the Congress Party nationally led by Indira Gandhi. In most cases he had acted in mythological roles as various gods of the enormous Hindu pantheon, which is comparable only to the ancient Greek. Before he came to politics, "NTR's" image as a manifestation of

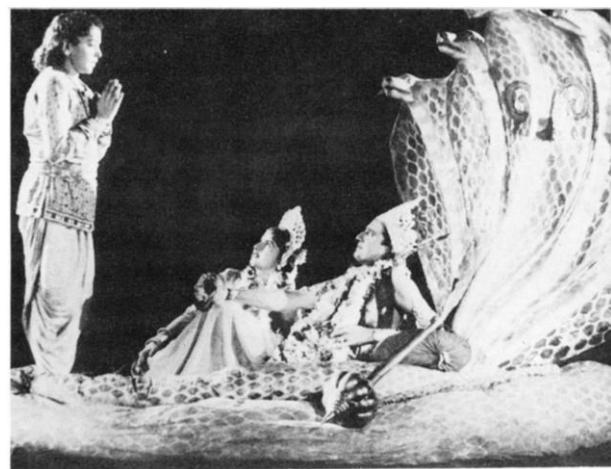
God had been firmly established. Early in the morning, a crowd would assemble before his house every day, crying, "Devadu! Devadu!" [God! God!] when he appeared on the balcony, dressed in his pyjamas, often with a toothbrush. When he stood for the elections, women washed the roads along which he would travel and walked miles to have a glimpse of him passing by in the distance. There was no question of God not being elected.

Mircea Eliade commented on the traditional separation of myth and fact in India, giving the example of millions of religious-minded women who pour libations upon the *lingam* which they know to be a representation of the male member resting in the female, but have learnt to see it purely as a symbol of God (the divine *creative* principle) without ever confusing it with the physical fact it represents. As old women, charged with religious fervor, place flowers upon the phallus, nothing could be further from their minds than sex. The cinema has stood this traditional relationship of myth and fact on its head. Myth has become fact. The film star who plays God has become God. The cinema is too palpable, too reflective of the "surfaces of reality"; the objects seen in it cannot be turned into mere symbols. So much so, that when something goes wrong (as it very often does) in MGR's or NTR's states, they are not blamed. Their teflon images are not touched; the tarnish overtakes their minions who are perceived as incompetent. God is unable to function because of the failings of man. Only the urban upper-middle class, educated in modern sciences and humanities, are prone to disillusion. NTR's God-like appearances on the balcony continued; so did his actions, like seeing visitors at 5 a.m. wearing an earring in one ear or dressed up like the great religious reformer Vivekananda, complete with a huge turban on his head. God is as convinced of his divinity as his people down on earth are.

World cinema, as I have suggested earlier, represents a pressure, within the evolution of the popular arts, towards greater naturalism.<sup>6</sup> Indian cinema, developing on a huge scale within a mainly agricultural population with myth-laden minds, countered this pressure by mythologizing the present, but with the expansion of the industrial-urban sector the mythological as a genre has had to beat a retreat;

today the share of mythologicals in total production is only 20%, down from 70% in the twenties.<sup>7</sup> The mythological cannot deal with the multifold phenomena of modern society and becomes inadequate, despite exceptions like *Jai Santoshi Maa*, which was enormously successful and spread nationwide a previously very restricted goddess cult.<sup>8</sup>

What happens in consequence is that cars, skyscrapers, jet planes, and gun fights are now used to endorse the same basic traditional faiths as the mythologicals did, without denying the audience its visual experience of modern life. For example, in *Amar Akbar Anthony* three brothers estranged in childhood have grown up separately under surrogate fathers of the three major religions of contemporary India—Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity—but ultimately come together again at the end in a realization of their (Hindu) unity. In adulthood they know each other without realizing their relatedness, and their mother is also present, although they know her only as a surrogate mother. (The father has been disposed of very early in the story.) When the mother loses her eyesight, Akbar takes her to a famous saint, Shirdi Sai Baba, and implores him to restore her sight. Two blobs of light (you can see them, they are *there*) issue from the saint's eyes and travel across the screen in a panning shot over the congregation, stop at the mother's eyes and enter into them. Now she can see. Other manifestations in the film—clothes, places, cars, trains—are modern, but the faith invoked is no different from that in *Bhakta Prahlad* (about a legendary boy-devotee of God) or *Bharat Milap* (about Rama's devoted, ideal brother from the *Ramayana*), or any of the professed mythologicals. In films like *Trishul* [Trident] and *Karz* [Debt] dead mothers call upon their sons from the other world to take revenge on enemies. They power the muscles of the protagonists with a divine maternal force enabling them to perform miracles, such as defeating thirty strongmen with their bare hands. In *Karz*, the mix of the modern and the traditional peaks in the reincarnation of the hero whom an evil but sexy woman had run over by a car near a shrine of Goddess Kali. The revenge consists of the running over of the villainess by a car near the same shrine. Thus is the present constantly mythologized and the currents of traditional belief kept alive underneath a modern exterior.



BHAKTA PRAHLAD (1959)

Except for the core of religious doctrine and ritual, all other physical manifestations are jazzily modern in these films; perhaps the object is to emphasize the means of resolution of conflicts as divine and eternal, above the purview of social change. Traditional faith is not allowed to be subverted by the spirit of doubt and scientific enquiry that led to the invention of the modern industrial products parading across screen space. Closely related to this is the way certain new visual models came to dominate the mythological genre, particularly in the costuming of the gods. The painter Raja Ravi Verma's imitative English academic recreations of Indian gods and goddesses transformed them from the superbly idealized figures of the Ajanta frescoes and the stone images of Vishna or Shiva into florid bazaar oleographs in a crude homage to the naturalistic idiom of the colonial rulers' art. Nonetheless, today any treatment of the gods in the cinema that did not follow Ravi Verma's insipid style would be in trouble with the audience. Yet it is this feeble model of mythology that has had to retreat in the cinema under the pressing need for encounters with the modern. Interestingly, and perhaps with parallels in the West, this debased mythological spirit has reasserted itself through television, in programs like the *Ramayana* series with its Ravi Verma style of visuals; the driving spirit behind its look is a fixed fundamentalist view of tradition uninformed by either a historical sensibility or an understanding of Indian art traditions.

Thus India's age-old society, faced with the specter of modern science, still balks at the prospect of being dominated by it and shaken out of the security of traditional faiths. A significant though small minority whose body and soul have both entered the industrial age pro-

duces the “new cinema,” but the vast pre-industrial masses of India continue to mythologize both the past and the present.

#### NOTES

1. “All the movements and expressions of the characters on the screen were so realistic that the spectators felt that those moving characters were also speaking . . . Harishchandra and Taramati of the screen bring tears to the eyes of the spectators. This would perhaps not happen if one saw them in flesh and blood on the stage. The scenes of the forest, the forest fire, the river, the hangman’s house, the hen pecking around—all these are unrivaled . . .” Letter to the Editor of the *Kesari*, Pune, 6th May, 1913.
2. Prithish Nandy, Interview with Kamlapati Tripathi, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, January 1984.
3. Narmada Shahane, *Studies in Film History*, Film Institute of Poona, 1970.
4. Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, University of California Press, 1954.
5. B. V. Dharap, “The Mythological, or Taking Fate for Granted,” *The Indian Cinema Superbazaar* ed. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet, Vikas, Delhi 1983. Santoshi Maa (Mother Santoshi) was a little-known local goddess made into an all-India cult by the film on her.
6. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1965.
7. B. V. Dharap, op.cit.
8. For a discussion of the relevance of *Jai Santoshi Ma* to contemporary urban Hindu society, see Veena Das, “The Mythological Film and its Framework of Meaning,” *India International Centre Quarterly*, March 1980.
9. B. V. Dharap, op.cit. “. . . So long as ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, superstition rule the large mass of people in this country . . . such pictures will always have an audience and the sway of mythological films will continue.” Also see op.cit., reference to new audiences being initiated to cinema through the mythological and accounting for its survival.

# Reviews

## LITTLE VERA

**Director:** Vasily Pichul (sometimes written “Pitchul”). **Script:** Maria Khmelik. **Photography:** Yefim Reznikov. **Music:** Vladimir Matietski. **Gorky Film Studios,** 1988. **Distribution:** IFEX.

Vasily Pichul’s *Little Vera* (1988) has emerged as a new Soviet film that has found a home audience and an enthusiastic one abroad wherever it has been shown. On the most immediate level, the film can be seen as a clear example of Gorbachev’s *glasnost* (new openness) policy as applied to film. But it is much more.

While not a “woman’s film” *per se*, this recent Soviet work set in a drab Ukrainian industrial town is written by a woman (Pichul’s wife, Maria Khmelik) and is centered around Vera (Natalia Negoda), an eighteen-year-old Russian woman whose disjointed emotional life suggests significant questions of gender as well as of *glasnost*. As Teresa de Lauretis notes in *Technologies of Gender*, “Although the meanings vary with each culture, a sex-gender system is always intimately interconnected with political and economic factors in each society.” The raw edges of *Little Vera*’s narrative are thus those of an oedipal and patriarchal system (political/economic/cultural) of signification and representation that is showing serious signs of disruption and change.

Three early shots set the tone and direction for the rest of the film. The opening establishing shot before dawn is of a bleak industrial

town on the banks of a large body of water. The second is a morning scene on the balcony of a cheaply built apartment house as Vera is told in a brusque and unsympathetic manner by her mother to “make something of your life . . . as your brother has done.” And shortly thereafter, again on the balcony, her working-class father quietly tells her in a comforting voice, “Cherish your youth.”

What Maria Khmelik captures in her script, which she wrote in 1983 after visiting her husband’s native town and family (the script found no sympathetic producer for four years, in other words until *glasnost* had come into being), is the “on-edge” existence Vera lives out. The film chronicles a few brief weeks in Vera’s life. The driving force of the narrative is her romance with an engineering student, Sergei—a Dionysian free spirit. We observe their engagement, separation and eventual reunion, tentative though it may be, on the evening that Vera verges on suicide.

American reviewers will surely capitalize on the many “firsts” in this low-budget Soviet feature by a young husband and wife team: first Soviet film with a sense of sexual candor (the actress Natalia Negoda has contracted to grace the pages of *Playboy*), the first mention of AIDS in a feature film (a passing joke about government warning pamphlets), and the first